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ABSTRACT

This paper, one of several written for a comprehensive policy study of early childhood education in Illinois, examines and summarizes the literature on the problems of young children in adjusting to starting school full-time and describes the nature and extent of their difficulties in relation to statewide educational policy. The review of studies and rating scales focuses on the following areas: the variability of children's behavioral reactions to starting school; specific areas of behavior indicative of how well children adjust: personal emotional adjustment, social adjustment, and attitudes and behavior in response to the intellectual demands of the school (cognitive/verbal, and general cognitive); comparisons of children with nursery school experience and children without nursery school experience; identification of children's problems of adjustment; and the effect on children's adjustment of school policies on when and how children enter school. Data suggest that (1) knowing the types of behavior to expect as well as the problems of adjustment constitutes a first step in developing home and school strategies to help reduce stress and provide a smooth transition, and (2) school policies should be examined and evaluated in terms of the effects they have on children's adjustment. The following strategies are recommended for handling problems of adjustment: (1) development of handbooks/guidebooks for parents and teachers; (2) more formal instructional programs for teachers; and (3) development of a statewide educational policy. (DST)

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PROBLEMS OF ADJUSTMENT TO SCHOOL

ILLINOIS STATE BOARD OF EDUCATION

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Springfield, Illinois

January, 1985

FOREWORD

This paper is one of several written for an Illinois State Board of Education policy study on Early Childhood Education. The interpretations and conclusions expressed herein do not necessarily reflect the position or policy of the State Board of Education. The paper was prepared by Dr. Leandro A. Bartolini, Research and Statistics Section, State Board of Education.

Ted Sanders
State Superintendent of Education

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Purpose

Any person, when placed in a new or strange environment, is expected to adjust. Adjustment for very young people starting school full-time can be particularly stressful. There are social and emotional demands of adjusting to the new circumstances, a new teacher and a large group of peers. In addition, there are intellectual and linguistic demands as a result of starting formal school activities (Hughes, 1979). The purpose of this paper is to examine and summarize the literature on the problems of young people as they adjust to school. More specifically, its purpose is to describe the nature and extent of children's difficulties as they begin school and to ask if these difficulties are of such a nature that they might be addressed by statewide educational policy.

Problems of Adjustment

Thompson (1975) noted that certain levels of social, emotional, and physical maturity are necessary for success in school. Children who have reached these levels when they start school and make a satisfactory initial adjustment are more likely to have a successful educational career. Likewise, those who are not ready have difficulty adjusting and are less likely to succeed. If this is true, what types of experiences are related to satisfactory adjustment? Furthermore, what criteria are used to determine satisfactory adjustment?

Hughes (1979) states that while practical guides have been available for some time for parents of children about to enter school, little formal research has been done regarding the problems of adjustment of young people as they start school. Moore (1966) agrees and states that "few studies have been made of the problems faced by the ordinary child in coping with everyday school life." Strom (1978) notes that parents and teachers can never be completely sure what a child's responses to starting school will be.

> Some boys and girls who say they want to come suddenly become afraid on arrival. Others seem to belong immediately. A few appear uncertain and withdraw. When we consider the range of adjustment, we should realize that some children have experience with nursery and preschool groups, while others do not. Some have brothers and sisters at school; others do not. Some have always had playmates; others have not. Some have been taught to be suspicious of strangers and now are expected to quickly place their complete confidence in the teacher.

The authors cited above agree that a wide range of behavior is typical of a group of children entering school for the first time. Knowing what types of behavior to expect and knowing what the problems of adjustment are constitute a first step in developing home and school strategies to help reduce stress and to provide for a smooth, successful adjustment.

Thompson (1975) reported on the development and use of an instrument to measure initial adjustment to school. She identified four main areas of behavior generally accepted as indicative of how well children adjust: personal emotional adjustment, social adjustment, and attitudes and behavior in response to the intellectual demands of the school (cognitive/verbal and general cognitive). Adjustment in these areas were measured by having teachers rate children using a four-point scale on 20 different items associated with the areas of adjustment. The items and the areas each item exemplified are listed below because they are typical of the types of adjustment problems encountered when children enter school.

(1)	Settling in school	(S)
(2)	Co-operation with other children	(S)
(3a)	The child's relationship with the teacher (i)	(S)
(3b)	The child's relationship with the teacher (ii)	(S)
(4)	Attention seeking	(P)
(5)	Need for teacher's approval	(P)
(6)	Acceptance of criticism and blame	(P)
(7)	Reaction to strange adults	(S)
(8)	Level of concentration	(C)
(9)	Use of play materials	(C)
(10)	Attitude to work	(C)
(11)	Creativity and originality	(C)
(12)	Interest in surroundings	(C)
(13)	Attitudes towards new activities	(C)
(14)	Self-reliance	(P)
(15)	Verbalization of wants and needs	(CV)
(16)	Verbalizing abilities in school work	(CV)
(17)	Following instructions	(CV)
(18)	Behavior at story time	(CV)
(19)	Ability to cope with personal needs	(P)

According to Thompson, the letters in brackets indicate the areas each item was thought to exemplify: (S) Social, (P) Personal/emotional, (C) General cognitive, (CV) Cognitive/verbal.

The twenty items used by Thompson to measure adjustment to school were chosen because they represented behaviors considered important by nursery, kindergarten, and elementary school teachers. The four possible ratings for each item were as follows: (1) the child was performing very well; (2) the child was performing about average; (3) the child was having some difficulty; and (4) the child was having considerable difficulty. Children with high numerical ratings on any one item or group of items would be identified as having problems of adjustment in the specific area or areas.

Thompson used the instrument to measure adjustment to school and to explore the differences between children who had nursery school experience and children who did not have nursery school experience. She concluded first that the areas of behavior considered important by teachers are interdependent. That is, behavior adjustment in one area was often dependent upon behavior adjustment in another area. Furthermore, children with nursery school experience were better able to adjust to academic work. There was no significant difference, however, on emotional or social adjustment to school between children with nursery school experience and those without nursery school experience.

Hughes (1979) also used rating scales completed by teachers to identify children's problems of adjustment when starting school. A variation of the rating scale developed by Thompson was used as well as a general item which asked for a simple YES/NO judgment on whether the child was having difficulty coping with school. Unlike Thompson, however, Hughes focused on the percentage of children having difficulties and asked if policies regarding school entry were related to problems of adjustment.

The Hughes study included a sample of 260 London children. Approximately 13% of the sample children were identified as having general difficulty coping with school. Twenty-five percent had more specific difficulties: the inability to persist with an activity without help from the teacher, problems with the use and understanding of language, and difficulties with fine motor skills. Difficulties with social relationships were less frequent. From 12% to 18% of the children were reported to have difficulties with social relationships. Only 6% of the sample children were judged to be unsettled in school, meaning that they were unhappy or unwilling to stay in school. Generally, boys had more difficulties than girls in adjusting to school. Another finding was that problems of adjustment were generally shortlived; that is, they did not persist 18 months after entry for most children.

Policies regarding school entry described in the Hughes study are not common in American schools. In the London sample, children enter school both in September and January. Children who enter in January usually constitute a smaller group, and these children are placed in already existing classes. Adding January entrants to already existing classes sometimes results in very large class sizes.

Hughes found no significant relationship between frequency of adjustment problems and age of children. She did find differences, however, between children who started school in January and those who started in September. The later entrants had higher frequencies of adjustment problems. Hughes noted that time of year by itself seemed unlikely to account for the differences. In the schools sampled, however, January entrants tended to join larger classes and were more likely to represent a relatively small percentage of the total number of children in the class which was already established. In other words, class size and the ratio of new children to the overall number of children in class appeared to be factors which could account for differences in the levels and frequencies of problems of adjustment.

Hughes concluded that the findings reported are consistent with the findings of other researchers who have done similar studies.

> The overall pattern and frequency of difficulties found in this study--both on entry to school and eighteen months later--is very consistent with other studies of infant school children. For example, the proportion of children whom we found to be having general difficulty "coping with school" (13% after half a term and 14% eighteen months later) is very similar to the proportion reported by Chazan and Jackson (1971; 1974) to be "somewhat" or "very" disturbed at school (15% at 5 years

and 13% at 7 years), and is also very similar to the proportion judged to be "maladjusted" in the National Child Development Study (13% at 7 years; Davie et al., 1972). Although these studies all used different scales, it seems likely that they were all identifying children with some kind of emotional disturbance. Similarly, our finding that "concentration" is the single most frequent source of difficulty, both on entry and at follow-up, corresponds to Chazan and Jackson's finding that "restlessness" is judged by teachers to be the most common classroom problem at 5 years. In addition, our finding that the boys' performance is significantly worse than the girls', both on entry and at follow-up, confirms many previous findings that boys have more difficulties than girls in the infant school (Davie et al., 1972; Chazan and Jackson, 1971, 1974; Coleman et al., 1977).

The Hughes study has been reviewed in some detail because it is one of the few which asks if there is any relationship between problems of adjustment and policy regarding when and how children enter school. Given the list of problems identified, she states that it is reasonable to assume that some difficulties are related to personality or home background factors. She also suggests that policies on when (time of year) children enter school, at what age are they permitted to enter, and how they are grouped may also be important. She comes to no firm conclusions about these policies, but states that the data suggest that a strong case can be made for the examination and the evaluation of such policies in terms of the effects they have on children's adjustment.

Moore (1966) studied the problems of adjustment of children entering school by interviewing their mothers. He states that the validity of parents' testimony may be questioned but also argues that this source of information should not be ignored. His study is concerned with the child's view of the situation as expressed to his or her mother, as reported by the mother.

Approximately 164 children in 115 different London schools were studied. The children ranged in age from 6 to 11. Moore found that approximately 80% of the children experienced some difficulties. About half were identified as having moderately or markedly severe difficulties. The most frequent difficulty was a general reluctance to go to school, reflecting a general attitude, rather than a specific aspect of school life. Aspects of school life identified most frequently as difficulties included problems with teachers, difficulties with school work, dislike of school lunches, and objections to the lack of privacy and cleanliness of the toilets. Problems relating to other children and to physical education were identified but were less often reported. Girls reported fewer problems than boys, and boys who were only children tended to report the most problems of adjustment.

Moore accounts for some problems (reluctance to go to school for no apparent reason, difficulties with other children, and difficulties with physical education) by asserting that they are characteristics of overdependent children. He also notes that some problems can be attributed to the

personalities of some children (i.e., fussiness, oversensitiveness, or contrariness). Nevertheless, Moore (1966) concludes that:

> there is no denying that many of the problems arise from faulty school organization, inappropriate attitudes in teachers, and underlying these, a system of social pressures which makes insufferable demands on both teachers and [those] taught.

Moore notes that some problems can be easily resolved by providing the necessary basic conditions of sound education, including small classes, adequate space and equipment, classrooms designed for sound absorption, better lunch rooms, and pleasant washrooms which provide privacy. Equally important, however, are the reduction of pressure for children to compete and the improvement of instruction on how to help children adjust.

Other educators have identified adjustment problems using various academic and social readiness rating scales in their attempts to determine if there are different adjustment problems for students of different backgrounds, to develop guidebooks and handbooks for teachers and parents to use in helping children to adjust, or to develop intervention programs designed to help children adjust (White and Poteat, 1983; McDermott and Watkins, 1981; McClinton and Topping, 1981). In these cases, only selected difficulties were identified as a result of using rating scales which identify predetermined types of problems. Generally, all adjustment problems can be classified according to the broad areas identified by Thompson: social adjustment, personal/emotional adjustment, and cognitive/verbal adjustment. Sometimes different labels are used, however, i.e., emotional maturity, social readiness, learner readiness, behavior adjustment. While the interdependence of these adjustment problems is suggested, how they are interdependent is not explained. The interdependent relationships are vague and confusing. There is a tendency, however, to separate problems of adjustment related to learning and the formal, academic aspects of schooling from those related to the informal aspects of schooling, i.e., the social/emotional difficulties encountered by children.

Remedies and Recommendations

Strategies to handle problems of adjustment tend to follow one of three courses of action: handbooks/guidebooks for parents and teachers, more formal instructional programs, and suggestions for social policy. Handbooks for teachers and parents are broad in scope, and recommendations range from general to specific. Proposed instructional programs tend to focus on a limited type of problem or on a specific target population, i.e., disadvantaged children. Recommendations for statewide educational policy are the least specific and are frequently stated in a manner which suggests the need for further study.

Handbooks and Guides

Any number of handbooks or guides for parents and/or teachers can be used to illustrate this approach to resolve problems of adjustment. Glicksman and Hills (1981) prepared a guide published by the New Jersey State Department of Education for early childhood educators. The guidebook was designed to

enhance communication and cooperation between preschool teachers and kindergarten teachers. The purpose was to help young children more easily adapt to different environments.

Curtis and Blatchford (1981), with the help of practicing teachers, developed strategies and ideas to be used by teachers to benefit children with social adjustment problems. Berkman (1979) developed an instructional unit for teachers to use in the classroom to help five-year-olds make the transition from home to school. The unit, to be used during the first week of school, centers upon the teddy bear. The teddy bear, considered to be familiar and comforting to children of this age, is used as an object through which children transmit and receive communications.

Fowler (1982) examined strategies for children with special needs. She proposed a step-by-step procedure for coordinating the transition of these children from preschool to kindergarten. Topics addressed included classroom composition, teacher attention and reinforcement of the students, the physical arrangement of the kindergarten, the child's daily schedule, classroom rules and routines, academics, self-help skills, and support systems.

Craycraft (1979) developed a 4-6 week unit for teachers to assist students (kindergarten level to second grade) in adapting to a new or changing environment. The goals of the unit focused on personal/emotional adjustment, although developing oral language skills was also an objective. Needed classroom materials, operational procedures, and suggestions for teacher behavior were listed.

In a more comprehensive paper on school readiness by Curry and Tittnich (1975), the roles of parents and teachers in providing support to children and setting expectations for a smooth adjustment to school are reviewed. Furthermore, ways by which teachers can provide for continuity in transition from prior school experience and ways in which kindergarten children can be prepared for first grade are explored.

Specific recommendations for parents and teachers are varied and numerous. Strom (1978), for example, while recognizing the wide range of adjustment in children, advises parents to safeguard their children against "the possible stress of sudden separation and the fear of an alien environment." He recommends that parents be honest with their children about school and accept the fact that some dissatisfaction with school is natural. Furthermore, it may be worthwhile for teachers to schedule school visits consisting of a few short play periods in the spring for children who will be entering school in the fall. This experience, he states, will help children learn that school will be an enjoyable place, allow them to meet some of their peers, and help them build confidence.

Instructional Programs

There is duplication in recommendations proposed in handbooks and guides and in the recommendations proposed in instructional programs. The major difference between handbooks or guides and instructional programs, suggested here, is that instructional programs tend to be more research-based and are

designed specifically for an identified population of student, i.e., the special education child or the disadvantaged child. Instructional programs may also focus upon a specific type of problem or difficulty. In addition, instructional programs are more likely to include steps or procedures to be followed when resolving difficulties. Spivak and Shure (1974), for example, describe a training program utilizing problem-solving skills designed to help preschool and kindergarten children with social adjustment difficulties. Word concepts and cognitive skills were developed using games and dialogue between adults and children.

Building upon the interpersonal problem-solving measures developed by Shure and Spivak, Sharp (1979) studied the relationship between interpersonal problem-solving training and behavioral adjustment for 54 black, low-income preschool children. Through teacher rating scales and independent observation checklists, the children were classified as adjusted, inhibited, or impulsive. They were then assigned to one of three training conditions: problem-solving as developed by Shure and Spivak, a modified problem-solving condition, and a general cognitive enrichment program stressing language and number concepts. Sharp found that problem-solving training did not help in the improvement of preschoolers' behavioral adjustment.

White and Poteat (1983) designed an intervention method for implementing social skills training for kindergarten children. Consultation and teacher-directed activities were utilized. Rubin and Hayvren (1981) studied the social and cognitive play of preschool-age children. Based upon findings that indicate that unpopular children play in less emotionally mature, cognitive, and social ways than children who interact well socially, they found that noncompetitive play in familiar environments may help unpopular children change their behavior.

Schaefer and Edgerton (1979), while not proposing an intervention program, studied parent educational beliefs, behaviors, and values and sociodemographic characteristics to determine if these variables could be used to predict child adaptation to school and achievement during kindergarten and first grade. They found they could predict how well children would adapt to school based upon the variables studied and suggested that this knowledge could be used when designing instructional programs.

Suggestions for Statewide Educational Policy

Most recommendations and remedies suggested in the literature on problems of adjustment are directed at teachers and parents. Only occasionally are recommendations directed at school districts, and even less frequently are suggestions made for statewide educational policy. Statewide policies, however, can often be inferred from recommendations intended for local-district situations.

Hughes (1979) stated that many difficulties of young children were due to personality or home background factors. She also suggested, however, that policies (state or local) regarding school entry, including age of entry, time of entry, grouping of children, and class size, be examined and evaluated in terms of the effects they have on children's adjustment. Moore

(1966) was more specific. He asserted that many problems were a direct result of the way schools were organized and recommended small classes, adequate space and equipment, and better physical facilities including classrooms, lunchrooms and washrooms.

McClinton and Topping (1981) studied the effects of the full-day kindergarten on the adjustment of first grade students. A sample of 80 children from 10 public first grade classrooms were rated by teachers using an academic ability and a social adjustment rating scale. They found that teachers judged children coming from full-day kindergartens to be more capable than students from regular kindergartens. The implication for policy is that full-day kindergartens may be more effective in helping students to adjust, both socially and academically.

Mayfield (1980) conducted a survey of kindergarten and primary programs in the Greater Victoria School District #61 in British Columbia. She studied children's orientation to school and various aspects related to children's transition to first and fourth grades. Teachers, principals, and parents were questioned. Her recommendations focused upon the organization and administration of the school district. Many could be adopted by other districts, and many could be implemented with less difficulty if state policy were supportive or encouraging. Ten recommendations were presented: (1) assess needs of children for orientation programs; (2) establish more transition classes for the kindergarten to first grade group; (3) shorten kindergarten days at the beginning of the school year, increasing the time children are away from their homes gradually; (4) give kindergarten teachers released time to visit preschool programs; (5) state kindergarten goals and objectives more specifically; (6) reduce class size; (7) increase parent involvement in the schools; (8) provide parent education courses; (9) assign only qualified teachers to kindergarten classes; and (10) obtain ideas from teachers concerning pertinent inservice programs.

Summary

There is a general consensus among those who have studied the young child as he or she enters school that placement in this new environment can be particularly stressful and that adjustment is necessary. Some children adjust more easily than others. The purposes of this paper were to examine the nature of the difficulties encountered and to ask if these difficulties were related to educational policy.

A number of rating scales are available which can be used by educational researchers and teachers to identify the types and frequency of problems of adjustment. Generally, problems of adjustment are related to behaviors identified by teachers as important. While different labels may be used for each type of adjustment problem identified, three categories are used consistently: social adjustment problems, personal or emotional adjustment problems, and problems associated with intellectual demands and learning.

Educational researchers and teachers suggest that many children have difficulties adjusting when they enter school because of home background factors or personalities, i.e., overdependence on parents, oversensitiveness, or contrariness. Some problems of adjustment, however,

can be attributed to the organization and administration of the school or school district, to lack of training or poor attitudes of teachers, and to general societal pressures (to compete, for example).

Three general approaches are used to address problems of adjustment. First, handbooks or guides have been developed for use by parents and teachers. Such guides include recommendations for parents on how to prepare their children for school and suggest activities which may be used in cooperation with teachers. Teachers are also given advice on activities which will help children adjust. Sometimes, teaching units are developed for teachers to use in the classroom for the specific purpose of reducing or removing the stress associated with school entry.

Another approach to address problems of adjustment is to use more formal instructional programs. These programs are usually designed for a particular student population such as special needs children or disadvantaged children. Instructional programs tend to be more research-based than handbooks or guides, but recommended activities frequently overlap. Such programs can include consultation and teacher-directed activities and are more likely to prescribe a procedure to be followed when addressing problems of adjustment.

Recommendations for new or different policies generally focus on local school organization and administration. They range from general, such as improving instruction, to specific, such as reducing class size. Many recommendations can be adopted by different districts. Supportive statewide policy may help districts to implement recommendations.

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